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SUBJECT: Tapping Water in Kenya's Arid North Eastern Province, Part One

Reference: Nairobi 1041

Summary

1. In Kenya's arid North Eastern Province, livelihoods have centered on pastoralism (the practice of herding livestock) for hundreds of years. The traditionally lucrative and relatively stable pastoralist lifestyle which relies on a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle came under severe threat at the time of Kenya's independence, however, and the area's more recent history has brought overpopulation, overgrazing, refugee flows from Somalia, and the mushrooming of permanent settlements in grazing areas, all of which have increased the fragility of the land. Kenya's Grand Coalition Government has created a new ministry to oversee the development of Northern Kenya and other arid lands, which presents an opportunity to galvanize interest and develop a consensus in approach for addressing the long-term development needs of this long-neglected region. But those who wish to bring development will have to make some difficult choices if the North Eastern Province and other areas of Northern Kenya are to achieve sustainable economic growth. Unless the new ministry is able to interpret its mandate in a way to constructively influence the development initiatives of other ministries, the donor community, and politicians seeking to secure their electoral futures, the future for Kenya's pastoralists and the economy they support is at risk. This is particularly a priority in terms of water development projects.

2. This is the first of two cables describing the challenges of development in Kenya's North Eastern Province, particularly in terms of water development, in which the Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa is providing assistance. End Summary.

Pastoralism: A Lifestyle Under Siege

3. In Kenya's largely arid North Eastern Province, the

population of mostly ethnic Somalis has relied on grazing livestock to make a living for hundreds of years. Perennial grasses helped livestock survive dry seasons and droughts, and herders frequently crossed clan lines to water and graze livestock because of well-understood reciprocal agreements. During the dry season, herders concentrate their animals around fixed water points. When the rains begin, herds spread out to wet grazing areas.

¶4. While pastoralism has provided a viable livelihood in a region that can ecologically support little else, a number of factors have contributed to its gradual decline. Some have been unintentional, others have not, but all have built on one another to accelerate sedentarization (a shift from nomadism to permanent settlement). At the time of Kenya's independence, pastoralism suffered a heavy blow. One of the tactics used by Kenyan security forces to control movement and defeat an uprising of irredentist Somali nationalists during the Shifta War (1963-67) was to force large numbers of people into controlled villages and kill their livestock, which effectively sedentarized them.

¶5. The emergence of multiparty democracy in Kenya has also contributed to the sedentarization process. As politics in the area are driven solely by clan identity, politicians competing for votes encourage the creation of permanent settlements by their clans to create voting blocs. Government officials often create new administrative districts to mollify clan leaders competing for political representation.

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¶6. The good intentions of the donor community have also driven sedentarization. Food distribution sites set up to respond to droughts often create permanent (and dependent) settlements. Boreholes, pans (i.e., stockponds), and dams built to extend the range of traditional grazing areas have the same effect. To give an idea of the scale of these development efforts, a study by the Food and Agriculture Organization found that in Wajir District there were four fixed water points in the 1940s. By 1996, there were 75.

Unintended Consequences and
Other Problems Intensify Fragility

¶7. Development efforts have created conditions allowing for more livestock (and people) to live off the land, but the sedentarization process has created a number of serious challenges to the carrying capacity of the North Eastern Province's fragile landscape. The disruption of traditional grazing patterns has led to overgrazing (and the disappearance of critical perennial grasses) and an increase in the number of settled populations on traditional grazing areas. This in turn has led to increased competition between rival clans over land and water resources, which frequently has resulted in violence. Kenya's porous borders with its less-stable neighbors such as Somalia and Sudan make it easy to obtain small arms and light weapons, which make the violence even worse.

¶8. In this sense, the proliferation of permanent water sources has had a counterintuitive effect: it has increased vulnerability by encouraging overforaging. During the last serious drought (2005/6), large livestock die-offs were due to lack of forage, not lack of water.

¶9. Outside forces bring additional pressure to bear on the population of the North Eastern Province. One of these is the influx of refugees from regional conflicts. Refugees have flocked to camps around the town of Dadaab for the last 17 years. There is now an estimated population of 200,000 refugees in the area, most of whom fled the longstanding conflict in Somalia. Severe deforestation

driven by refugees' need for firewood and complaints by host communities that refugee water consumption has lowered the underground water table are just two examples of their negative impact.

Will New Ministry Use Its Mandate
To Drive Sustainable Development?

¶10. Although the proliferation of ministerial posts in the new Grand Coalition Government was based on purely political calculations (reftel), the creation of the new Ministry of State for the Development of Northern Kenya and Other Arid Lands in April 2008 was a signal of government understanding that Kenya's arid and semi-arid areas (which together comprise 80 percent of Kenya's land mass) need serious attention. Kenya's arid and semi-arid areas consistently lead the country in poverty rates and lag behind in development indicators.

¶11. The new ministry has assumed oversight of the World Bank-funded Arid Lands Resource Management Project, whose staff understand well the limits of developing arid areas. It is not clear from the new ministry's mandate, however, that the government officials who created it understand the extent to which an improvement in living standards is linked with respect for the carrying capacity of the land.

¶12. According to the new government circular announcing the responsibilities of Kenya's ministries, priorities for the

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new ministry include infrastructure development, encouraging the development of townships along roads, livestock development, water supply, and irrigation development. The top funding priority in the Ministry's 2008 budget submission was for road construction, according to Permanent Secretary Hukka Wario (a long-time civil servant and former Ambassador who also is from Marsabit, in the arid upper Eastern Province).

¶13. Less clear is the mechanism through which the new ministry is supposed to interface with other ministries that have overlapping mandates, such as the Ministries of Livestock and Water. The first step in the right direction was a recent interagency meeting chaired by the Prime Minister to discuss disaster risk reduction in arid lands. While the meeting was narrowly focused on garnering UNDP funding, a more coordinated approach to arid lands policy in general may be on the way.

¶14. While road construction and other infrastructure development are much needed for the region's long-term economic development and more equitable access to social services, those who wish to "bring development" to the North Eastern Province will have to make some difficult choices if the land providing critically important fodder and water is to remain viable. Some believe that there are already too many boreholes and too many grazing animals in too small an area. With the disappearance of perennial grasses and an increase in the number of small bushes and invasive non-native species (inedible to livestock), it is easy to understand why most conflicts in the region are over access to grazing areas and water.

Comment: Balanced Approach
Critical to NEP's Future

¶15. The North Eastern Province now supports an increasingly settled population that wants roads, clinics, schools and wells. If the area's residents are to overcome the dark history of the Shifta War and truly integrate into the rest of Kenya, transportation, education, health, and

improvements in the livestock industry are critical. At the same time, it has always been a mark of honor and wealth among pastoralists to maintain large herds that in turn need lots of forage. While pastoralism has always driven the economy of the North Eastern Province, it has only been the proliferation of permanent water sites that have allowed unsustainably large herds to survive.

¶16. As time goes on and resources become more constrained, both sides will have to give. There is a limit to how much settlement the North Eastern Province can take. Staff members from the Arid Lands Project complain mightily about the cost of trucking water to communities that have settled around pans that go dry in between rainy seasons. If there is a balance to be found, it is most likely to happen under the watchful eye of the new Ministry of State for the Development of Northern Kenya and Other Arid Lands. Initial indications are that the new minister, Mohamed Elmi, who is both a former employee of Oxfam and from the North Eastern Province himself, will bring an experienced eye to the problem and give voice to the experienced technical staff in the Arid Lands project.

¶17. If scientists' predictions that global warming will cause weather patterns in the North Eastern Province to become more unpredictable, droughts to become longer and more frequent, and fragile soils to become drier, it will not make anyone's job any easier. It will, however, force us all to take a critical look at how we "bring development" to a dry land. End Comment.
SLUTZ